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# The Failure of a Pseudo-Christian Community in a Nation-State in Crisis: 28 Days Later

## **Abstract**

This essay argues that the central group of survivors of the Rage plague in Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) constitutes a nascent Christian community. This community is formed when the four survivors band together around a common commitment to protect the most vulnerable among them. However, this community fails to provide an alternative to the nation-state because, in its search for protection, it flees into the arms of the nation-state and chooses to answer the violence of the nation-state with violence of its own in order to survive. Christian faith and practice exist in the film only under the conditions established by the nation-state and primarily for the private comfort of individuals who must, ultimately, submit to the authority of the nation-state.

## **Keywords**

28 Days Later, Christian community, nation-state

## **Author Notes**

Karl E. Martin is a professor of American literature at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, CA. His research interests include Flannery O'Connor, American religion, and representations of both Christianity and the nation-state in popular culture. He has published scholarship on O'Connor, the use of popular culture in Christian worship, the graphic novel *Watchmen*, and the film *Magnolia*.

Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) tells the story of a neoliberal nation-state that dissolves into chaos under the pressure of a massive public health crisis and the story of an army officer who tries to re-constitute the nation-state and, he believes, civilization itself, through the imposition of military discipline and brutal coercion. In the midst of this violent transformation, a small group of plague survivors tries to reach a place of safety and "salvation." Through the film's use of Christian symbolism associated with the plague survivors, it reflects the complexity of attempting to form and maintain an alternative community in the political context created by the nation-state in which all such alternative groups are seen as merely subsets of the nation-state rather than communities that have a clear standing of their own. The film displays this complexity in two primary ways. First, it displays the way the nation-state privatizes Christian faith both before and in the midst of the crisis.<sup>1</sup> Early in the film, Christian faith and practice are presented as purely private matters that can ease the emotional burden of the individual in the midst of a public crisis but cannot address the public crisis itself and certainly cannot provide the basis for the creation of an alternative community. Secondly, the final action sequence of the film dramatizes the way agents of the nation-state claim sole authority over lethal violence and thus tempt the plague survivors to engage in what Rene Girard calls mimetic desire by adopting the violent means of the nation-state rather than opposing the nation-

state through the formation of a truly alternative community with its own politics.<sup>2</sup>

This reading of the film is deeply informed by theorists of the development of the neoliberal nation-state and how such nation-states privatize what they define as religion and claim authority over all uses of lethal violence. In a lecture given in the spring of 1979, Michel Foucault argued that neoliberal nation-states exhibit a “state phobia,” a fear “that the state possesses in itself and through its own dynamism a sort of power of expansion, an intrinsic tendency to expand, an endogenous imperialism constantly pushing it to spread its surface and increase in extent, depth, and subtlety to the point that it will come to take over entirely that which is at the same time its other, its outside, its target, and its object, namely: civil society.”<sup>3</sup> “Religion,” I would argue, can be defined as one expression of that civil society.

The film is set in a nation-state that has privatized religion in ways scholars have argued is typical of the neoliberal nation-state. In his study *The Myth of Religious Violence* (2009), William Cavanaugh argues that the nation-state ascribes to the foundational myth that it was born promising to bring an end to religious violence, specifically violence between Catholics and Protestants, who, the myth proclaims, were killing one another over doctrinal differences. Cavanaugh’s primary claim is that this “religious violence” does not exist as an identifiable category because “religion” itself is a category created by the very

nation-states that claim to provide an alternative to religious violence. In his argument, Cavanaugh builds on the scholarship of Jonathan Smith who claims, “Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his [sic] imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.”<sup>4</sup> Cavanaugh writes, “Religion is a constructed category, not a neutral description of a reality that is simply out there in the world.”<sup>5</sup> Applying Smith’s insights to a study of the development of the modern nation-state, Cavanaugh argues, “The modern state was born as a peace maker in this process, relegating religion to a private life and uniting people of various religions around loyalty to the sovereign state.”<sup>6</sup> Members of the state are free to engage in practices deemed “religious” by the nation-state; however, these practices are seen as the private choices made by citizens whose primary allegiance must be to the nation-state. Cavanaugh writes, “The fact that Christianity is construed as a religion, whereas nationalism is not, helps to ensure that the Christian’s public and lethal loyalty belongs to the nation-state.”<sup>7</sup> We might understand this development as “a migration of the holy from church to state in the establishment of the ideal of dying and killing for one’s country.”<sup>8</sup> None of this discussion is meant to suggest that *28 Days Later* directly addresses the characteristics of the neoliberal nation-state but that the nation-state portrayed in the film follows the pattern of the neoliberal nation-state as defined by scholars such as Foucault, Smith, and Cavanaugh.

In fact, the film is set in a particular nation-state, Britain, that owes much of its distinctive characteristics to Margaret Thatcher who served as Prime Minister from 1979 until 1990. Thatcher's influence on British society was significant. In her drive to restructure the British economy, she argued for the privatization of religion and all other forms of civil society. David Harvey writes, "There was, she famously declared, 'no such thing as society, only individual men and women'—and, she subsequently added, their families. All forms of social solidarity were to be dissolved in favor of individualism, private property, personal responsibility, and family values."<sup>9</sup> In such a political climate, individuals and their families are free to practice "religion" only to the extent that it does not claim their ultimate allegiance, for that allegiance belongs to the nation-state. Harvey goes on to write, "The ideological assault along these lines that flowed from Thatcher's rhetoric was relentless. 'Economics are the method,' she said, 'but the object is to change the soul.'"<sup>10</sup>

Early in *28 Days Later*—and prior to the introduction of the cast of plague survivors, the film portrays a nation-state descended into chaos. After four weeks spent unconscious, Jim (Cillian Murphy) awakes from a coma caused by a bicycle accident, walks into the streets of London, and finds evidence of a nation-state in chaos. Seemingly emptied of its population, central London appears as a ghost town with currency blowing in the streets, trinkets normally sold to tourists strewn on a bridge over the Thames, automobiles and newsstands abandoned, and

a message board cluttered with handwritten notes written by people seeking to find their loved ones. Symbols of state power such as Parliament are shown but appear empty and silent, devoid of all activity. Monuments dedicated to the nation-state's history seem oddly out of place with this lone, gaunt man gazing at them rather than tourists admiring them.

In the film's second half, we meet Major Henry West (Christopher Eccleston), the highest ranking state authority figure in the film. Believing that not only the United Kingdom but all of Western Civilization has been wiped out by plague, West and his handful of soldiers are committed to the herculean task of re-establishing civilization by repopulating the English countryside and establishing a small society with hope for the future. However, West can only envision the success of this project starting with the subjugation of the two surviving females, Selena (Naomie Harris) and Hannah (Megan Burns). West has promised his soldiers, who are beginning to despair over their prospects for survival, that he will provide them with women, and so when Selena and the fourteen-year-old Hannah arrive with Jim, West plans to offer them to his soldiers as sexual partners whether the women are interested in the men or not. His idea, that the nation-state can be reinstituted by means of such violence is telling, for it provides the only image of the functioning of the nation-state in the film and thus provides a lens through which to view earlier representations of the apparatus of the nation-state. With the insight into the functioning of the nation-state in mind,

we can return to the film's opening sequence that reveals information about the apparatus of the nation-state known to the viewers but unknown (or at best only partially known) to all of the characters in the film. This crucial opening sequence seems to reveal that the crisis that has devastated the United Kingdom is a crisis of the nation-state's own making.

Although the opening sequence comprises only the film's first few minutes, it conveys crucial information to the viewers; consequently, a close reading of the scene should yield a better understanding of the crisis the United Kingdom faces and allow viewers a clearer understanding of the characters and how they are reacting to the crisis. The scene is set in a research lab where animal experimentation is being conducted and a virus later identified simply as Rage is being developed. The formal name of the lab, the Cambridge Primate Research Centre, suggests that an arm of the nation-state has been involved in the development of a very dangerous virus. The natural question would be why such research was being conducted. The Rage virus would have two primary applications. It could either be under development for use as a biological weapon against the enemies of the nation-state or as a possible means of social control within the nation-state. As a biological weapon, Rage would be highly unpredictable and thus problematic, so a more likely application for the experiments being conducted would be that Rage is being developed as an aid for social control. If the researchers can understand the causes of rage, they might be



able to inhibit its expression. The nation-state would have the most to gain in developing a drug that could be used to pacify enraged populations. And the nation-state would have a strong incentive to prohibit any private group from conducting such experiments. Consequently, we can reasonably conclude that the research is state-sponsored.

The film's opening sequence features violent images that might have been culled from news broadcasts from around the world. Most of the scenes are of urban unrest, scenes of nation-states in peril. Enraged protestors are destroying property and being met by riot police. As the camera pulls back and the news footage no longer dominates the entire screen, viewers become aware that they are seeing what a chimpanzee strapped to a table in a testing lab is seeing—violent images being displayed simultaneously on multiple screens in front of him. A jump cut takes viewers to a view of what the Cambridge Primate Research Centre's security cameras are seeing as three animal rights activists are breaking into the lab in order to document the abuse of the animals and, we subsequently learn, to free them. The protestors are discovered by a lab technician who warns them that, "The chimps are infected. They're highly contagious." He goes on to tell them, "They've been given an inhibitor." His defense of the actions of the Primate Research Centre is that, "In order to cure, you must first understand." When pressed by one of the activists, the technician tells them simply that the animals have been infected with "Rage." Presumably, the rage which is the

natural response of the people featured in the news reports who are responding to what they believe to be injustice has been artificially induced in the laboratory animals. The agitated chimps in cages reflect animals in the early stages of the experiment while the chimp strapped to the table, remarkably calm in the face of the violent images on the screen, may have been given an early version of an antidote for the Rage virus.

The chimpanzee strapped to the table is being exposed to an overwhelming number of violent images yet remains surprisingly calm. In fact, the chimp does not have to be caged as the other animals are and does not engage in the attack on the humans by the other chimps once the cages in the room are opened even though his restraints are minimal. This suggests that the inhibitor the chimp has been given is meant to keep him calm even in light of scenes of violence that might, under other circumstances, enrage him. It is likely that the other chimps have been given some kind of drug that enrages them as the first step in a procedure meant, ultimately, to pacify rather than enrage. So when the animal rights activists free the caged chimps, they unleash an animal population infected with a virus for which the lab has of yet not developed a sufficient antidote. This reading of the scene helps explain why the chimp would be shown scenes of social unrest on so many of the video screens—developing a means of keeping citizens calm under circumstances where they might naturally become enraged would be a logical goal of the nation-state. Following Foucault and

writing about the film, Sarah Trimble has argued that while neoliberalism promises minimal state control and intervention, actually “neoliberalism requires constant vigilance and intervention.”<sup>11</sup> Keeping citizens calm in the face of a crisis would certainly require the constant intervention of which Trimble writes. The action of the film, I would argue, is set in motion by the terrible failure of an experiment meant to design a sophisticated form of calming intervention.

Following the opening sequence set in the laboratory, the film shifts to the story of the main character. In the twenty-eight days Jim spends in a coma, the twenty-eight days not shown to viewers, the nation-state known as the United Kingdom has been utterly destroyed. Evidence of the devastation of the plague and the nation-state’s failure to cope with the crisis are everywhere.<sup>12</sup> The only “food” available to Jim initially are cans of soda from a vending machine in the hospital. Advertisements for consumer goods are prominent in the cityscape Jim wanders through searching for other human beings, but obviously no stores selling these goods remain open. Jim stuffs what appears to be currency into the plastic bag into which he has previously placed the soda, not yet realizing that currency no longer has any meaning. While the Parliament building is shown in the background, it stands as a monument to the failure of the nation-state and holds about as much meaning as the trinkets strewn on the bridge over the Thames. Most of these trinkets are replicas of the pride of the nation-state, now mocking its failure.

When Jim first meets two other survivors, Mark (Noah Huntley) and Selena, Selena tells him the story of the last four weeks, including news reports of infections that have wiped out the populations of Paris and New York (reports that later appear to be erroneous or at most only partly accurate). Upon hearing the account, Jim's first questions are, "What about the government? What are they doing?" When Selena insists, "There's no government." Jim responds by saying, "Of course there's a government. There's always a government." His statements signify his belief that the nation-state is not an artificial creation but a natural, eternal entity. Mark insists that the government and all forms of government authority—elected officials, the police, and the army—have disappeared.

Jim's next questions are about the families of Mark and Selena. The questions are predictable in a society deeply marked by Thatcherism, for neoliberalism insists that no significant social institutions exist between the personal, private family and the nation-state itself; thus, it seems only natural that Jim would ask next about the family and not about any other social institutions (including the Christian church). Jim's line of questioning suggests his hope that, if government authority is gone, then surely the authority of the nuclear family has been maintained. Mark tells him that his family members and Selena's family members are all dead and insists that Jim's family members are most certainly dead as well. In spite of Mark's words, Jim argues that he must go and see if his family members have survived. Mark, against his better judgment, assures Jim

that in daylight, when it is safer to travel, they will journey to find Jim's "dead family." This concession eventually costs Mark his life. But Jim's insistence on knowing the well-being of his family demonstrates the extent to which he has been conditioned to life in the nation-state. He divides his experiences into two categories—his public life with its experiences that occur under the supervision of agents of the nation-state and his private life that occurs in the domestic sphere of the nuclear family. No other aspects of Jim's life seem significant, and no other aspects of his life are alluded to in the film other than his economic role in the society as a bicycle messenger.

In the absence of the authority of the nation-state and the assumed destruction of the nuclear family, the early scenes of the film explore whether or not Christian communities still remain and whether Christian faith and practice can provide a viable alternative to the chaos caused by the virus. A series of early scenes in the film clearly establish the ineffectiveness of Christian community and the irrelevance of Christian faith to the current crisis.

The significance of Christian faith to Jim and to the film is established by Jim's entrance into a church, the first structure he enters after leaving the hospital and before being rescued from a gang of infected people by Mark and Selena. Interestingly, he does not initially enter an official government building seeking answers and does not seek out a police station to place himself under the protection of agents of the nation-state as his later questions about the government

might predict. Rather, after witnessing the destruction of central London, he enters a church. The Christian symbolism is established by the crane shot from inside the church itself prior to Jim's entrance. Before Jim opens the door of the church, viewers see the door in the lower background of the shot. In the extreme foreground viewers see a cross establishing the space as sacred to Christians and foreshadowing other expressions of Christian faith that will be featured in the film. Shortly after he swings open the heavy wooden door to the old church, Jim's hope of finding help in the church are dashed as what viewers come to understand to be an infected priest comes toward Jim threatening his safety. The priest's faith and role as a leader of Christ's church have not been enough to stave off infection. When he was infected by the virus, he succumbed to rage just like the rest of the population. Still not knowing what is happening, Jim strikes the priest in self-defense even as he bemoans the fact that he has acted in a violent way toward this member of the clergy. Jim's reluctant use of violence is a mark of his character that will not change until his mock resurrection scene prior to the final action sequence of the film. Rather than offering the solace he has sought, the church becomes a place of further danger for Jim. That danger is exemplified by the pursuit of Jim by the other infected Londoners who are occupying the church along with the priest.

Jim was not the first Londoner to seek shelter in the church during this time of crisis. All of the streets of London may be deserted, but the church is

filled with people. Most, however, appear dead, and those who remain alive are infected. Jim's calling out a greeting to them awakens the infected survivors, and, like all those infected in the film, the presence of an uninfected person enrages them.<sup>13</sup> In the church, in the midst of the dead and others infected but still living, the infected are presented as calm. They are not attacking one another, nor do they show signs of being enraged. Jim's presence awakens them, and they begin to chase him from the church. Indeed, most of the attacks by the infected are directed toward survivors while they are enjoying some form of domestic life. This scene in the church, then, foreshadows subsequent attacks by the infected. Jim's visit to the church does not end as he had hoped, but the visit is the first indication of the significance of Christian faith and practice in his life prior to the Rage plague. In the midst of a crisis beyond his understanding, Jim seeks the solace of the church. Unfortunately for Jim, the church's sanctuary presents no place of safety or salvation. In the next scene where Christian symbolism is employed, the focus has shifted from the institutional church to the family. Once again, Christian faith provides little help or consolation.

The trek Mark, Selena, and Jim embark upon to find Jim's family marks an abrupt change in the film as a beautiful vesper's hymn is featured on the soundtrack. As Jim and his companions leave central London and approach and enter his parents' home, the soundtrack features Perri Alleyne singing the first three verses of the gospel hymn "Abide With Me." The first verse can be heard as

the trio leaves London. “Abide with me; fast fall the eventide; / The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide; / When other helpers fail, and comforts flee, / Help of the helpless, O abide with me.” As Jim ascends the stairs in the silent home and approaches his parents’ bedroom apparently overcome by the stench of death, Alleyne can be heard singing the gospel hymn’s third verse: “I need thy presence every passing hour; / What but thy grace can foil the tempter’s power? / Who like thyself my guide and stay may be? / Through cloud and sunshine, O abide with me.” The singing ends and the soundtrack is silent as Jim enters the bedroom to learn that his parents have committed suicide in the midst of the crisis. Jim takes a photograph from his mother’s hand, a photograph of Jim (apparently an only child) and his parents. On the back, his mother has written, “Jim, With endless love, we left you sleeping. Now we’re sleeping with you. Don’t wake up.”

After Jim discovers the bodies, the second verse of the gospel hymn is heard. By inverting the second and third verses as they are printed in the British Methodist hymnal *Hymns and Psalms*, the second verse’s poignant message is sung after Jim has discovered the bodies of his parents. “Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day; / Earth’s joys grow dim, its glories pass away; / Change and decay in all around I see; / O thou who changest not, abide with me!”<sup>14</sup> The inclusion of the gospel hymn on the soundtrack helps further establish the fact that Christian faith and practice are designed to provide comfort and meaning for the individual even if it cannot address the public crisis. First of all, the gospel



hymn is clearly associated with Jim's character and not the characters of Mark and Selena. The gospel hymn's lyrics follow Jim's actions so closely that it seems as though this might be what is playing in Jim's memory as he finds his parents. Secondly, the lyrics of the gospel hymn stress comfort offered to the individual in the midst of a crisis. The repeated use of the first person is one indication of the private nature of the comfort offered. The temptation sung of in "Abide With Me" seems to be to give up in despair. Perhaps following the pattern of his parents, and much more than the other two survivors, Jim seems tempted in this way. Early in the film, neither Mark nor Selena seems tempted to despair. Rather, they are focused on violent resistance to the infected.

The poignancy of this domestic scene is soon undercut as Jim's farewell to his parents is linked to his sentimental indulgence and Mark's death. The Christian message of the hymn may bring comfort to Jim and to the viewers who watch him bid farewell to his parents, but it provides little guidance in a world swarming with enraged plague victims.

While Mark and Selena sleep, Jim seeks further comfort and lights a candle to provide some light as he examines photos on the refrigerator. As Jim examines the photos, video images meant to represent Jim's memories fill the screen. These images stand in stark contrast to the last video images featured in the film—the scenes of urban unrest on the screens at the testing lab. The scenes meant to represent Jim's memories are of a typical weekend afternoon with his

parents. Jim and his parents stand in the kitchen engaging in small talk. The scene is reminiscent of a home movie. Much like the earlier gospel hymn, the home movie represents a purely private memory, one known only to Jim and his parents and not shared by Mark or Selena who sleep.

An exterior shot of the house establishes the fact that two infected neighbors see the candlelight Jim is using to view the photographs on the refrigerator and rush the house. Symbolically, they are rushing in to disrupt the blissful domestic scene playing in Jim's memory. A bloody battle ensues during which Jim huddles in a corner while Mark and Selena kill his neighbors. And while Jim bemoans the fact that he has been attacked by one of his neighbors and his daughter, Selena, realizing Mark is infected, brutally hacks him to death before the Rage virus turns him into a danger to herself and Jim.

By linking the gospel hymn so closely to Jim's home and family and the scene of domestic bliss that plays in Jim's memory, Boyle highlights the inappropriateness of the Christian faith beautifully expressed in the gospel hymn to the new social situation Jim and Selena now face as survivors of a plague. The gospel hymn is associated with Jim's private, domestic life with his parents and has little to do with meeting the social chaos unleashed on the society by the Rage virus. Nor does the gospel hymn provide a means of establishing community between Jim, Mark, and Selena. The scene diminishes community because Selena must kill Mark after Jim's carelessness attracts the neighbors to the house. The

Christian teaching of love for neighbor must be ignored in the name of survival. Selena's brutality is presented as a more appropriate response. This is highlighted in the next scene as, while venturing back into the city, Selena explains how the virus is spread and why she had to swiftly kill Mark. She instructs Jim that he has only seconds to act between the time someone is infected and when he or she becomes fully enraged and dangerous. Selena stresses that family relations no longer matter. As Selena states, "It might be your brother or your sister or your oldest friend. It doesn't matter." Because at this point Selena knows that Jim has neither a brother nor a sister, her instructions should be read in a more general way—the family no longer matters. And, because Christian faith has been so closely allied with the family in the previous scene, Selena should be understood as saying Christian faith and practice no longer matter either. They are luxuries unavailable in a new social world where survival is as good as it gets. This thought is further stressed when Jim and Selena encounter another pair of survivors.

Upon re-entering London, Jim notices twinkling lights in a flat of a high-rise building, lights that are later revealed as Christmas lights even though nothing else in the film indicates that it is the Christmas season. The flat belongs to Frank (Brendan Gleeson) and his daughter, Hannah, who have barricaded themselves in their building for safety. After a harrowing escape from some of the infected, Jim and Selena enter Frank's flat. As they do, the tune of the Christmas song "Frosty

the Snowman” can be heard. While it is a far cry from the gospel hymn featured earlier in the soundtrack, the song, along with the Christmas lights in the flat, does once again place us in a Christian context. And, once again, Christian faith and practice are associated with the domestic space provided for private individuals in the larger public world controlled by the nation-state. Perhaps Frank is using the trappings of Christmas to buoy his daughter’s spirits, but the celebration of the birth of the Christ can do little to alter their current situation.

A morning scene on the balcony of the flat just prior to the quartet’s leaving for Manchester highlights that one of the film’s central tensions is between the Christian practice of care for the least among us and the rugged individualism personified in Selena. Furthermore, the scene seems to stress the idea that care for the least might have been an appropriate personal ethic prior to the plague but that it is now highly problematic. Their first night in the flat—the night before their conversation on the balcony—Jim and Selena speak of their divergent perspectives. Jim states that even if Frank and Hannah threaten to slow him down, he could not leave them behind. Selena, by contrast, argues that Frank and Hannah need them more than they need Frank and Hannah; thus, it is Frank and Hannah who are a liability. She maintains that if they were to slow her down, she would leave them “in a heartbeat.” In the conversation on the balcony the next morning, Frank admits that he and his daughter overheard Jim and Selena’s conversation. He admits his need for Jim and Selena, arguing that, if he leaves

with just Hannah, she will be vulnerable if anything were to happen to him. With Jim and Selena, Hannah will have greater protection. Hannah, however, presents the case differently, claiming that the need is mutual, that “We need each other.” The statement is categorical—Hannah does not feel the need to explain the claim. She states it as a given.

Coming from the youngest member of the survivors, the most vulnerable, Hannah’s claim can be seen as an assertion of Christian teaching for it recalls the teachings of Jesus recorded in Matthew’s Gospel. In the teachings Jesus offers his disciples concerning the final judgment, care for the most vulnerable is offered as the clearest hallmark of those “known” by God. Matthew records the words of Jesus: “Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’”<sup>15</sup> When those praised by the King in the parable ask when they did these works of mercy, Matthew writes, “The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’”<sup>16</sup> Granted, the scene need not be read in this theological context, but given the Christian trappings provided in the scene, it seems to invite a theological reading. Consistent with the teachings of Jesus, the

group, in joining together in mutual care with special attention to the most vulnerable among them, has taken a step toward forming a Christian community. The balcony scene marks a significant change in the way Christian faith and practice are presented in the film. The four survivors form a community centered on protecting the most vulnerable among them rather than as a means of providing private comfort or mere survival. Christian faith and practice are now presented as public expressions of an alternative way of being in the world. Unfortunately, as soon as this pseudo Christian community is formed, it undermines itself by deciding to pursue “salvation” in the arms of the state. So the film presents a Christian community as an alternative way of being in the world (what Stanley Hauerwas would call an alternative polis) but cannot fully realize a Christian community as an end in itself—only as a voluntary body which still must seek protection from the nation-state. This failure to fully envision Christian community will be evident throughout the film.

Also prominent in the scene is the first mention in the film of “salvation.” Frank has picked up a prerecorded radio broadcast from a group of soldiers promising survivors “salvation” if they can make it to a compound north of Manchester. With this pronouncement, the film takes on the cast of a religious quest; the survivors now can be seen as pilgrims on a journey seeking salvation. The sacred nature of the trek is once again signaled by the soundtrack. As the four pilgrims set out from London in Frank’s taxi, strains of “Ave Maria” are heard.

The survivors stop at a grocery to collect food, at a petrol station for fuel, and then at the ruins of a country church where they engage in what for them is a feast or, one might say, a shared communion meal. The soundtrack once again provides a significant interpretive sign. As the quartet of survivors gathers at the ruins of the church, the soundtrack features the “In Paradisium” section of Gabriel Fauré’s *Requiem*. Although the lyrics are sung in Latin on the soundtrack and thus would be understood by very few in the movie’s audience, the lyrics have particular poignancy for the moment: “May the angels lead you to Paradise / May the martyrs receive you at your coming / And lead you into the holy city of Jerusalem / May choirs of angels receive you / And with Lazarus, who once was poor / May you have eternal rest.” The scene marks the high point of Christian fellowship and unity among the survivors. Wandering from the group, Frank sees four horses running free in the countryside. He calls his fellow survivors to witness this pastoral scene. When Hannah asks if the horses are infected, Frank replies that they are not, that they are like a family. The horses, then, provide a symbolic representation of the four survivors and confirm their identity as a family.

These survivors, all remnants of decimated birth families, have been reconstituted as a Christian community. So even as the film portrays Christian faith and practice as marginalized and privatized in a neoliberal nation-state, it also holds out a form of Christian community as the best hope for survival in the search for salvation. But even in these scenes, violence encroaches into the

community. While at the petrol station, Jim goes exploring and encounters and kills an infected boy. It is Jim's first murder, and although it is done for the protection of the group, it signals Jim's willingness to engage in violence in apparent contradiction to Christian principles and indicates the precarious nature of the survivors as a Christian community. In addition, the killing foreshadows Jim's willingness to engage in more extreme forms of violence and suggests that the Christian community can only exist in this pure form when insulated from the structures of the nation-state into whose arms it is now heading.

The major shift in the film occurs when the survivors arrive at the military checkpoint near Manchester. Zombie movies such as George Romero's classic *Night of the Living Dead* sometimes present the zombie menace as only a temporary threat to the nation-state and resolve the narrative when agents of the nation-state are able to restore order. In such narratives, agents of the nation-state (be they soldiers, police officers, or political leaders) provide a place of safety for the survivors. Such is not the case in *28 Days Later*. In fact, it could be argued that the agents of the nation-state pose a greater threat to the well being of the survivors than do the infected. The infected, after all, are just expressing blind rage. The evil of Major West is more calculated and more malevolent.

The nation-state has crumbled into chaos, and a brutal and autocratic military leader promises that he can restore some semblance of order, but that order will come at a high cost. The Christian community that escaped the attacks



of the infected will be further tested in this new context. And it will crumble as it adopts the violent ways of the nation-state even while maintaining the form and appearance of Christian community. Its reliance on the nation-state for its safety and even its “salvation” will be its undoing.

Jim, Selena, Frank, and Hannah safely arrive at the barricade outside Manchester but find no soldiers manning the facility. A distraught Frank attempts to drive a crow away from a dead body only to have a drop of infected blood fall into his eye. The others, knowing he is infected, attempt to rally the courage to kill him, but before they can do so, a group of snipers riddles Frank’s body with bullets. Jim, Selena, and Hannah are taken by the soldiers to a country estate. Safe from the infected population, the trio should be relieved, but soon the nine soldiers and their commanding officer, Major West, become a greater threat—especially to Selena and Hannah—than the infected ever were.

In the scenes at the estate, Boyle skillfully doubles the action of the opening scenes and the spread of infection that wiped out the nation-state in order to reveal the levels of coercion and violence inherent at the founding of the neoliberal nation-state and pervasive in its ongoing life. Faced with a crisis he believes is total, Major West ignores the logic of Sergeant Farrell (Stuart McQuarrie) who argues that the plague is no doubt limited in its scope and that they are not the sole survivors on the planet. Assuming civilization still exists elsewhere, Farrell argues the soldiers have the responsibility to maintain the

values of the civilized world which include the humane treatment of the men and women who have fled to them for safety. Farrell is committed to maintaining civilization and does not feel the urgency to violently coerce others in order to establish a new order. While the violence at the founding of the United Kingdom may lay buried deep in the past and is shrouded with the myths related to national identity and the civilized values for which Farrell advocates, the violent founding of the reconstituted nation-state is all too obvious.

The first indication that the scenes at the manor will double those of the film's first half comes when Major West introduces Jim to Mailer, a soldier who has become infected. West has chained Mailer in a courtyard where he is keeping him alive and announces that Mailer is being kept alive as an experiment: "The idea was to learn something about infection, have him teach me." When Jim asks him if he has learned anything, West responds, "He's telling me he'll never bake bread, plant crops, raise livestock. He's telling me he's futureless, and eventually he'll tell me how long the infected take to starve to death." The scene is reminiscent of the opening scenes of the film. Rather than a chimpanzee strapped to a table, we see a man chained in a courtyard. West's words echo the words of the lab assistant at the Cambridge Primate Research Centre who tells the activists, "In order to cure, you must first understand." Only this time a cure is not being sought and the experiment is taking place under less controlled—and more brutal—circumstances. Just as the first experiment goes awry when the activists

release the chimps, West's plans to learn from Mailer end badly when Jim releases Mailer who goes on a rampage through the house infecting or killing the other soldiers.

Major West's commitment to survival doubles Selena's survival mentality prior to her joining into community with Jim, Frank, and Hannah; furthermore, his view of civilization is similar to the view informing the primate research being conducted by the nation-state. In contrast to Sergeant Farrell who believes that the island has been quarantined and that elsewhere in the world "normal" life is going on, West believes the infection has been spread worldwide (earlier, Selena told Jim of news reports of infection in Paris and New York) and, consequently, believes he and his group of soldiers have the responsibility to rebuild civilization. He has, however, both a very grim view of civilization and a ruthless commitment to using violent coercion in order to achieve his ends. West argues that the world has not truly changed since the Rage virus wiped out most of the population of the United Kingdom. He stresses that in the time since the infection, what he has witnessed is people killing people, but this is what he witnessed, as a servant of the neoliberal nation-state, in the weeks prior to infection as well. The pace of the violence has quickened, but the presence of violence has been a constant. No doubt the violence he has witnessed is similar to the violence that inspired the nation-state to sponsor experiments into controlling people's rage in

the first place. As a major in the army, he has perhaps taken part in quelling some of the violence the chimp was forced to witness in the lab.

In addition, West expresses views on survival similar to those expressed by Selena prior to her “conversion” to more humane attitudes under the guidance of Jim, Frank, and Hannah. When she first meets Jim, she states that survival is as good as it gets in post-infection England. She grudgingly agrees to join Jim, Frank, and Hannah. In witnessing the family bond between Frank and Hannah, Selena realizes she was wrong, that the bond between father and child is precious and worth protecting. She despairs, however, when Hannah loses her father. Her attitude prior to her transformation is not unlike Major West’s attitude at the manor. What is different is the level of violence each is willing to engage in to assure survival. Selena repeatedly expresses her willingness to kill an infected person “in a heartbeat” in order to assure her own survival, but she rarely looks beyond her immediate survival. West has a grander vision of “survival” and, therefore, is willing to engage in more extensive coercion and violence to achieve his ends. After one of the soldiers attempts to molest Selena, West acknowledges his plan in a private conversation with Jim. Upon discovering one of his soldiers contemplating suicide because he could not go on living without a vision for the future, Major West recorded the radio broadcast promising “safety” and “salvation” to those who would join them. What he confesses to Jim is that he promised his soldiers women—for West, women represent a future, a restored

civilization through the subjugation of women, childbirth, and a renewed population. But West is not willing to establish a community where, eventually, Selena and Hannah can select a mate from among the available men and procreate. The women will become immediately available to all of the soldiers. Assuming gang rape can truly be the founding moment of a new civilization, West offers a vision of a new civilization with the violence of sexual abuse at its originating moment, and Jim's objection to this plan is the precipitating cause of the film's final action sequence.

The final act of doubling in the second half of the film is the ironic doubling of scenes of domesticity. Although Hannah is seen gazing at a photograph of herself and her parents following her father's death, the primary source of domestic imagery in the film's first half comes from Jim's memories of his family shown during the survivors' visit to his home. These visions are brought to life once the community of survivors escape from London, shop together at a market, and enjoy their feast and night of rest in the shadows of a ruined church. These scenes of domestic bliss are brutally mocked once the survivors meet West and his troops.

In the security state established at the manor and designed to rebuild the neoliberal nation-state, Major West assumes all authority, displacing the father/patriarch of the Christian community he subsumes under his authority. West's assuming of all authority occurs in two significant ways. The first occurs

when West's soldiers gun down Frank—he is, of course, already infected and therefore must be killed. But he is killed with excessive violence on the part of the soldiers, the first time an infected person is killed with excessive force in the film. The soldiers' use of violence is repeated as they somewhat gleefully gun down infected persons who attempt to gain entry into the estate.

The second instance of West's authority occurs when Jim is cast out of the community. The film's action confirms that Major West will allow no rivals to his authority. By doing so, the film demonstrates the tendency of the neoliberal nation-state to assume all authority unto itself. While the quartet of survivors is on the road to Manchester, Frank takes on a fatherly aspect—Jim even calls him “dad” when Frank wakes him from a bad dream. Major West provides a stark contrast. That West seeks to assume the role of male authority is made very clear at the dinner held to welcome Jim, Selena, and Hannah. The doubling is presented to provide a contrast. The dinner with Frank in the ruins of the church is a humble but joyful meal. The dinner in the country manor is meant to be more formal. West arrives in his dress uniform and insists that one of his soldiers remove his hat out of respect for the occasion. But the meal is a sham—the only aspect of the meal not taken from a can is an omelet, and the eggs used to make it turn out to be rancid. It is as though the security state in place at the manor is meant to reveal the corruption beneath the surface of the now decimated nation-state. Jim, Selena, and Hannah are all in greater danger under the care of Major West than they ever

were running from the infected. All of this is cast in theological terms because the radio broadcast offered not just “safety” but “salvation” as well. The only “answer to infection” West has to offer is the chance to submit to his authority and the sexual aggression of his men as a strange way of founding a new civilization.

Jim is the first to recognize the danger the survivors face. He gathers Selena and Hannah and attempts to leave only to be beaten and restrained by West’s men. Sergeant Farrell, the only soldier to come to Jim’s aid, is restrained as well. While the women are being prepared to be offered to the soldiers as sexual slaves, Jim and Farrell (who has earlier argued that the plague could not have completely wiped out civilization and thus also challenged West’s authority) are taken outside the compound to be killed. Their expulsion from the estate calls to mind images of the scapegoat as defined by René Girard, for Jim and Farrell are the ones who must be banished from the community as a sacrifice that will allow the community to continue, the founding event in West’s new civilization. This imagery will emerge with even greater importance in the film’s climactic action sequence. What follows is perhaps the film’s key sequence as Jim transforms from one of the survivors into a messiah figure, but a messiah who can only deliver “salvation” by answering the violence of West and his soldiers with violence of his own.

The two soldiers sent to kill Farrell and Jim bicker among themselves over whether to simply shoot their sergeant or to torture him. One shoots Farrell to

avoid the torture he fears his partner will enact and the other expresses his anger at his partner. In the confusion of the moment, Jim is able to escape. His death and resurrection are symbolically enacted in two ways. Initially, Jim lies down among the infected dead only to rise from among the dead when the two soldiers run to look for him elsewhere. Jim escapes from them by going over the wall of the compound into an area teeming with the infected. Removing himself from the area of West's control, Jim is free but assumed dead. As one of his executioners says, "He's over the wall. He's got no vehicle and no shooter. He's dead." Jim's second symbolic resurrection comes when, collapsed in exhaustion, he sees a jet streaming across the sky and realizes that Farrell was correct—civilization has not been extinguished everywhere. Informed by what might be identified as "special revelation," Jim is reborn into the role of Selena and Hannah's savior; however, he only succeeds by employing a level of violence unseen from his character up to this point in the film, a level to match the violence of the soldiers, a level so extreme that when Selena sees him kill a man she is nearly convinced he is infected with the Rage virus. Jim's actions can be seen as an example of what Girard defines as "mimetic desire," for even while resisting West's actions, Jim matches his level of violence.

After luring the soldiers out of the compound, Jim releases Mailer to wreak havoc on his former comrades. Mailer and the subsequent soldiers he infects do most of the killing in the manor. But Jim mortally wounds one soldier



and murders Mitchell while Selena looks on. In an excessively violent film, the murder scene remains shocking, for Jim straddles his victim and drives his thumbs into the man's eyes. This is the most brutal act of personal violence in the film, exceeding even the acts of violence committed by the infected. Witnessing the act, Selena prepares to kill Jim, believing he is infected, believing only the Rage virus could inspire his level of violence. Only her hesitation spares his life. With Hannah they flee to Frank's taxi only to be once more confronted by Major West who injures Jim. Alone in the car with West, Hannah manages to deliver West into the arms of Mailer who disposes of him quickly. After picking up Jim and Selena, Hannah drives away from the compound.

The film ends by jumping viewers ahead another four weeks where we learn that Selena and Hannah have nursed Jim back to health and are preparing to signal a jet that has been completing routine patrols in the area. We are to assume that the pilot finally sees the "hello" message the survivors have spelled out with sheets and will arrange to rescue them. The ending is somewhat surprising, for we are asked to assume that, even after the violence of the soldiers at West's compound, rescue by military representatives of a neoliberal nation-state is welcomed by the survivors.

According to the commentary on the DVD, several endings were considered. The one shown, not surprisingly, tested best with audiences and was used for the theatrical release.<sup>17</sup> Looking more like a family unit than ever before,

Jim, Selena, and Hannah are staying in a cottage in the countryside preparing to re-enter the civilized world, delivered to a healthy nation-state by a military pilot who one hopes is less corrupt than Major West. Among its many effects, the ending allows the audience to forget what they have just seen regarding the violent origins of civilization and once again feel comfortable in the nation-state they will re-engage once leaving the theater or completing their viewing of the film on DVD. While resisting West's attempts to possess Selena and Hannah as sexual objects for his soldiers, Jim is only able to establish a family-like unit with the two women through the mimetic copying of the violence West employs. The pseudo-Christian community hinted at earlier in the film has now been displaced by a form of a nuclear family with Jim and Selena as the surrogate parents to Hannah. And this family unit can function under the authority of the neoliberal nation-state without challenging its authority the way a Christian community might.

Rage destroys both the nation-state and the nascent security state West attempts to found in its place. Jim's rage delivers the survivors to safety but only through his own violent actions more appropriate to the functioning of the nation-state than to a Christian community. The family, rather than a truly Christian community, has been maintained, but only by an expression of the violence associated with the nation-state itself. Therefore, the film confirms two realities regarding Christian faith and practice in the context of the neoliberal nation-state.

The first is that Christian faith and practice will be privatized under the authority of the nation-state, appropriate to comfort individuals and families but ineffective in dealing with public life in the nation-state. The second is that Christian communities will face the temptation to assume the methods of the nation-state as a means of survival in that nation-state and by doing so will cease to be truly Christian communities with their own alternative polis. The Christian community formed on the balcony of Frank and Hannah's apartment has succumbed to the temptation to maintain its existence by answering the violence of the nation-state with violence of its own. The Rage plague has been averted, but the nation-state has not been fundamentally altered. The Christian community finally fails to provide an alternative way of being in the world. It only exists under the authority of the nation-state.

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<sup>1</sup> William Cavanaugh argues that the nation-state defines Christianity as a species of the genus "religion." See *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 3-10.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas is among the scholars who would argue that the Christian church offers an alternative politics to the politics of the nation-state. See his "Introduction" to *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011). My argument is not that the survivors intentionally attempt to become the church but that they are not able to resist the nation-state and its violence because they cannot imagine an alternative politics.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 187.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982), xi.

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<sup>5</sup> Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 58.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>9</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005), 23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Trimble, "(White) Rage: Affect, Neoliberalism, and the Family in *28 Days Later* and *28 Weeks Later*," *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 32 (2010), 299, *OmniFile Full Text (H.W. Wilson)*, EBSCOhost (accessed August 15, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> The film is difficult to categorize. Because the film does not contain any beings brought back from the dead, some would not characterize it as a zombie film while others, Jordan Carroll among them, associate the film with more recent "fast zombie" films. Carroll provides a fascinating reading of the film. He argues that older zombie films present nation-states with manageable risks—societal leaders have time to develop a strategy to meet the threat. *28 Days Later* resembles more recent "fast zombie" movies by portraying a society plunged into crisis so rapidly that societal leaders have no time to develop a strategy for confronting the crisis.

<sup>13</sup> This is the first scene among many that indicates *28 Days Later* is not a zombie film in the traditional understanding of the category. The film simply contains no zombies as the term is commonly used. No dead human beings are reanimated. And we have no indication that the infected feed on human tissue. Sarah Trimble characterizes the film well when she notes that the film should be seen as "[e]voking but also departing from traditional zombie films" (296).

<sup>14</sup> *Hymns and Psalms* (Peterborough, UK: Methodist Publishing House, 1983), 665.

<sup>15</sup> Matt. 25:34-36 (New American Standard Bible)

<sup>16</sup> Matt. 25:40.

<sup>17</sup> The DVD contains two filmed alternative endings and a third option that exists only in storyboards. In the first alternative, Selena and Hannah rush the injured Jim to a hospital after fleeing the compound. They are unable to save Jim's life, and, in the film's final scene, the two women exit the hospital to continue their journey seeking safety. The second alternative ending is similar to the ending of the theatrical release but without Jim who has apparently died. Selena and Hannah are saved when a fighter pilot sees their message. The ending that exists only in storyboard format presents the greatest departure, for it writes the soldiers out of the story completely. Jim, Selena, and Hannah bind the infected Frank and transport him, not to a military compound but to the testing facility featured at the film's beginning. There they find a reclusive survivor who tells them he has the answer to the infection. Frank can be saved by a whole-body blood transfusion. Jim insists on sacrificing his life for Frank by giving his blood to save Frank's life. This Christological ending places Jim very clearly in the role of savior.

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